CHIN-HUI CHEN

National Pingtung University of Science and Technology , Taiwan

TEACHING ELDERLY LEARNERS IN TAIWAN - RELATIONAL PERCEPTIONS AND COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION

Abstract:

As inspired by the Notion of the Third Age, it is common for people to pursue an active post-retirement later life, such as, through the engagement in later life learning activities. One purpose is to increase the sense of positive ageing. That is why this study focuses on senior education as the institutional context to examine language and communication with the elderly. The main concern is that language is the main tool in classroom interactions and how language is used by teachers to challenge or reinforce certain pre-existing (ageist) stereotypes about or cultural attitudes towards older people becomes an important question to ask. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is the theoretical framework guiding the semi-structured interviews with teachers working in senior education to explore whether they modify their language styles to adapt to elderly learners' conversational needs in class. This paper only presents one dimension of CAT, that is, the presumed relations and roles in association with language accommodation decisions. Teachers are presumed to have power over students but in the senior educational contexts, teachers are very likely younger than their students and therefore, intergenerational communication might emerge naturally in teacher-student interactions. In Taiwan, youngsters might perceive themselves less powerful than older people or those senior to them. Therefore, how power asymmetry in relation to the different facets of teacher-student relationships in senior educational contexts could also be an interesting topic to discuss.

Keywords:

communication accommodation theory, elderly learners, senior education, ageing stereotypes

JEL Classification: I29, I29

Introduction

Taiwan is a rapidly ageing country. To promote successful ageing and to improve elderly people's life quality, Taiwan government has been proposing senior educational programs at the level of universities and community-based learning centres. As cited in Hsiao, Liao, & Tsen (2014), the White Paper on Senior Education Policy in Ageing Society, developed by the Ministry of Education Taiwan, defines the meanings of attending senior educational programs to be promoting successful aging, slowing down ageing, reducing social isolation of older people and cultivating positive attitudes towards ageing. It is clear that elderly people's participation in lifelong learning activities can help them take on new roles after retirements, enhance physical, psychological and social functions, and eventually obtain opportunities to assess ones' life experiences (Moody, 1976). Hence, to realize the above aims and goals, senior educational programs have to be regarded as social service for older people, provision of channels for them to have social participation, and a means to help older people realize their self-fulfillment at the later life stage (Moody, 1976).

The above arguments lead to the main research rationale of this study. That is, the involvement of senior educational programs is expected to arrive at the result of reducing ageist perceptions or treatment in the given society. It can play an important part in the promotion of successful ageing. Instead of concerning senior citizens' motives to participate in learning activities, their behavioral patterns as students, or what teaching curriculums could be regarded as effective from the perspective of gerontological education, issues with respect to what roles language and communication play in the context of teaching elderly students are the main interest of study in this paper as it is believed that language plays an important role in the course of delivering successful senior education and hence in relation to promoting ageing-friendly society; however, such topics are relatively overlooked in existing literature. That is why this study aims to explore what communication strategies are employed by teachers to make teaching elderly students effective and successful from a broad sociolinguistic point of view. This paper is also interested in exploring what considerations are taken into account in the process of making choices of communication strategies for interactions with elderly students.

Given the research topics, it is clear that the research orientation of this study is closer to the field of linguistics. What follows is the theoretical framework that inspires the specific research questions asked in this study.

Theoretical framework: communication accommodation theory

This research aims to explore teachers' attuning of their talks and communication

patterns by taking into account elderly speakers' communication needs or their language production and reception competence. The theoretical framework that fits this research interest is the sociolinguistically elaborated model of SAT (Speech accommodation theory). SAT, as put by Coupland, et al. (1988, p.6), "is a social psychological model that explains and predicts interindividual sociolinguistic behaviours and their effects". In short, a speaker, after attending to the recipient's productive performance, converge or diverge some sociolinguistic orientations to realize some motivations of talk or interactional goals. The strategies that are proposed in the model of speech accommodation theory include the following four: (1) speech convergence, (2) divergence, (3) maintenance and finally (4) speech complementarity (c.f. Giles, 1973, 1980, 1984). The communication effects as predicted in SAT perceive convergence to be positively evaluated receivers whereas maintenance and divergence are negatively evaluated. As maintained by Coupland et al. (1988), SAT is a valuable theoretical framework for "our understanding of sociolinguistic behaviours within and between social categories". The implication of SAT in the context of intergenerational communication can be found in existing literature (i.e. Giles and Coupland 1984; Ryan, Bourhis and Knops 1991, Harwood 2000).

Referring back to the communication accommodation theory model proposed by Coupland et al. (1988) to further clarify the notion of speech accommodation in relation to sociolinguistic dimensions of interlocutors' communication attributes, abilities and needs. In the model (see Coupland et al. 1988), communication accommodation behaviours in encounters with the elderly can be explained by taking into two interdependent components, that is, "addressee focus" and "sociolinguistic encoding". "Addressee focus" explains the dimensions a speaker considers before and within a conversational encounter, such as the recipient's productive performance, interpretive competence, conversational needs and the role-relations. Furthermore, as the various forms of sociolinguistic encoding, they considered the convergence, divergence or maintenance of various linguistic realizations, such as dialect, or speech rates. Other kinds of sociolinguistic encoding of communication accommodation for talk with the elderly could include modification of the complexity, clarity or explicitness of the communication content. In addition, due to the perception of the field, tenor or mode in a communication activity, speakers could adopt certain discourse management strategies considered appropriate in terms of topic selection, topic share, face maintenance, and turn-taking mechanism. The various perceptions of interpersonal relations between the speaker and hearer could influence the modification or control of communication which could be realized in the interruption of the hearer's talk or choices of ways to address the hearer.

Teacher-student interactions in Confucian societies

In Confucian doctrines, the relations between teachers and pupils can be likened to be parents and children. As indicated by a great Master, 韓愈 Han-Yu, a Confucius practitioner in Tang Dynasty, "one who becomes your teacher is regarded as a father for a life time (一日為師終身為父)". It is therefore clear that teachers are highly regarded and deserve respect in Chinese people's views. To realize this notion, students are taught to be humble and to be obedient to their teachers. There is power asymmetry between teachers and students and it can definitely be reflected in teacher-student communications (Lu & Wong, 2007; Tsao, 2009). For instance, teachers get to tell students what to do and what not to do (Gao, 1998). Teachers are portrayed to be authoritative in class dominated with Confucian tradition and hence, they are the ones who initiate interactions in class (Hui 2005). In other words, they have the power and legitimated authority to manage and control floor of talk in class. Students are expected to pay their respect to teachers' authoritative status by listening to their words and attending well to their teaching (Hui 2005). Students' being polite to teachers is an important moral principle to be followed when interacting with teachers. The politeness as realized in language includes appropriate (honorific) address (i.e. surname + lao-shi, meaning, teacher) or greetings (i.e. good morning, teacher).

The idealized communication between teachers and students can be as stated above. However, in the context of senior education, the choice of communication strategies with students by teachers can be more complex than what has been discussed so far. The reason is that teachers can be younger than students in this context and older age in the Confucian tradition endows greater hierarchy and power to students who are older. In this case, can teachers' power be still unchallenged? Can they still practice control over turn-taking management in class without considering the potential offense derived from direct order and demand? It also comes to the point to ask a question regarding teachers' choice of communication strategies to show politeness and respect to student who are older than them. When power derived from both the teacher role and advanced age exists, which one is greater? Do teachers incline to maintain social distance between teachers and students or instead, build solidarity? What could be the possible linguistic realization of the complexity in communication between teacher and elderly students in Taiwan which is dominated by Confucian cultures?

In existing literature (i.e. Grainger 1993; Herman & Williams 2009; Ryan et al. 1995), communications with elderly people show the following features, namely, elderspeak features. They are for instance, speaking slowly and carefully, repetition, simplification, imperatives (especially to institutionalized elderly people), using terms of endearment

(i.e. my love or sweet heart), high frequency of tag questions, use of first names, frequent praise and frequent interruptions (of the residents by the caregivers). The above findings were mostly derived from communications between care-givers and older recipients in institutional contexts, such as nursing homes or social care service. There is no research which has explored communications with the elderly could be like linguistically in senior educational contexts and this is to be filled in by this study.

Methodology

The data for this research was obtained by conducting semi-structural interviews of 6 teachers (2 males and 4 females)with experiences in senior education and they are aged between 40 and 70. Two main questions are of particular interest in this research: (1) what relations emerge or are perceived to be relevant in teacher-elderly student interactions? (2)how do the perceptions of teacher-student relations in senior educational contexts influence the language used to communicate with elderly students?

Their answers with respect to relational perceptions were further classified into five types. That is, teachers in the context of senior education relate themselves to elderly students by positioning themselves as (1) service providers, (2) withdrawing from the roles as teachers, (3) as juniors, (4) as peers but acting younger and finally (5) as experts. Communication strategies in relation to the various perceived relations in teacher-elderly student communication are also reported as follows.

Findings

(1) Service providers

Teachers in senior educational contexts sometimes have to position themselves as service providers who have to manage solidarity with their students or make effort to make certain appeals to elderly students just to attract them to stay in class. As indicated by Teacher 1 (Lee, aged 50, female), "my students advised me to call those who did not show up and to send regards to them so that they would come to the class again but I had not considered asking for their personal contact information…I realized that teachers have to use certain methods to summon, to attract students to stay in your class rather than other teachers' and to build a good reputation which derives from mouth-spreading amongst students. Students know that teachers have to deliberately manage relationships with them so as to keep them come to the class and they have a strong awareness of this". Given the above statement, students have power to choose from classes given by many teachers. For them, they are like customers shopping around and teachers as service providers have to consider a number of strategies to appeal to their elderly students, rather than giving them disciplines. Bearing this

position in mind, my interviewees proposed a number of communication strategies which could work effectively for enhancing the role of service providers. For example, teachers would avoid forcing elderly students to follow rules and therefore, there is loose classroom management. Teachers are expected to show more concerns about elderly students' private life and give overwhelming praise to elderly students who have little progress in learning. Teachers cannot be too serious and they had better tell more jokes to please elderly students.

(2) Withdrawing from traditional teacher roles

As mentioned just now, teachers in senior educational contexts are not expected to talk in a traditionally authoritative way. Teacher-student communications in this context cannot be normalized in line with the traditional Confucian norms. Teachers in senior educational contexts tend to withdraw from traditional teacher roles defined in terms of greater power and higher hierarchy. They would instead relate themselves to elderly students as, for instance, friends, brothers or sisters. As mentioned by my interviewer, Teacher 4 (Hong, male, aged 69), "I act like my students' friends. In the classroom, I am indeed a teacher, but out of the context, those older than me are older brothers. I will never talk to them as a teacher. I think it is easier to interact with them as friends than as teachers".

Bearing this relational perception in mind, teachers tend to choose the following communication strategies as the sociolinguistic responses. For example, teachers are advised to be humble and avoid talking like an authoritative expert. For example, as stated by Teacher 4 (Hong, male, aged 69), "my students are highly intelligent and I would tell them in the first class that everyone has his specialty and I only happen to be an expert of art. But, in other fields, my students might know more than I do. Therefore, I have to be humble when interacting with them". Furthermore, Teacher 4 also suggested the avoidance of giving elderly students direct order or correction of their mistakes in class. "If a teacher talks to elderly students as if they were elementary students, imposes opinions on them or gives orders forcefully, they would be very upset. Teachers are only better at one field than older students are…. Mutual respect is still necessary instead of treating them as children".

(3) Juniors

As predicted earlier, teachers in senior educational contexts are very likely to be younger than elderly students. Hence, one kind of relation teachers perceive they have with elderly students would be juniors versus seniors. Their younger ages put them in a position to consider the traditional Confucian doctrine of requiring younger people to show respect to those who are older. Such a notion is reflected in the communication

between younger teachers and older students as well. Teachers' choices of communication strategies as responses to this role as juniors include, for instance, negotiation of proper forms of address students. This is highly relevant to the maintenance of elderly students' positive face. As stated by Teacher 2 (Chen, female, aged 50), "I need to show respect to my students, for instance, by calling those who look like aged 70 to 80, as aunties or sometimes, older sisters". Teachers sometimes talk sweetly so as to give guidance without offending elderly students: "I regard my students as my parents or as seniors, so I sometimes talk sweetly to them". Normally, teachers are the ones who give advice to students in class and therefore, their knowledge endows them greater power. However, in the context of senior education, teachers sometimes are on the contrary communicated as the receivers of advice. "My students are more experienced… they give me advice about something I don't know….." (Teacher 5, Chang, female, aged 50). Teachers as advice receivers would arguably make them rather inferior to their students. However, interestingly, teachers do not seem to feel threatened.

(4) Peers but acting younger

When teachers' ages are younger than their students', struggle of power between teachers and students could be possible and such struggle can be reflected in the communicative negotiations of which forms of address or which communicative strategies to use to show politeness and respect when interacting with students who are alternatively perceived as seniors.

However, there are instances in which teachers can be older people as well and given this peer identity defined by age. Teachers' choices of communication strategies considered appropriate may be slightly different from those chosen by teachers who are younger. As stated by one of my teacher interviewees (Teacher 6, Chiu, male, aged 65), he believed a sociolinguistic disassociation from older age is a good communication strategy used when interacting with his students in senior educational context. "I am 65 years old, so I can be regarded as an older person but I think I have treated myself as a junior to my students so that I can appear to be younger. The purpose of taking senior education is to make students young. So I have to acquire youngsters' behaviors and show those behaviors to my students" (Teacher 6, Chiu, male, aged 65). To make himself younger, Teacher 6 continued to argue that he would mock older age stereotypes and sometimes to swear to show his youth linguistically. As stated by him, "I told them a story in which there are four older people playing Mahjong. People like us being so old once drink a lot of water would rush to the toilet. But, the problem is that once going to the toilet, we forget to return. One of the older

men did so because he forgot that he had been playing Mahjong and went home directly. My students laughed out loud because they were in a way the same. They not only felt identified with the joke but also added more joking materials of negative ageing… Sometimes, we say words which are rude. Students would laugh because those words are used by youngsters. In class, they don't mind my swearing just for fun." (Teacher 6, Chiu, male, aged 65). Teacher 6 considered making fun of himself or his peers as a way to foster interaction with elderly students and increase rapport with them. "I always make fun of myself. My students said if a teacher can do so, they can also make fun of themselves to make others feel happy". The above-mentioned communication strategies of the teacher's attempt to relating himself with younger age identify and the perceived sociolinguistic styles, at the surface, could create a sense of humor in the interaction with elderly students. However, in the long term, adopting this communication strategy can be problematic, given the implied social attitude of alienating from older ages.

(5) As an expert

Some teachers' being younger than their students could trigger a kind of conflict when they intend to present themselves as experts in senior educational contexts. As argued by Teacher 3, Lu (female, aged 40), "during the break time, my students would come forward to ask for professional opinions from me. In the interaction, I am not treated as a friend or simply a person younger than my students, but alternatively, a teacher or an expert…Sometimes, I come across a dilemma to define my roles in class and so do my students. I do not want to portray myself as a teacher or just an ordinary person younger than my students. When I interact with my students, I want to teach them what I know. But, it is difficult for me to provide expert advice when being portrayed or perceived as a junior or a person younger. Therefore, eventually, I chose to purely act as an expert when interacting with my elderly students (Teacher 3, Lu , female, aged 40).

To demonstrate the expert identity and to reduce the younger age identity, teachers choose a number of communication strategies, namely, giving information-oriented lecture, no communication accommodation for professional topics and to maintain authority when teaching. As argued by Teacher 3, Lu (female, aged 40), the best communication stylization for delivering professional content or serious topics in class with senior students is simply to insist on playing the traditional teaching role by maintaining the authority knowledge endows to teachers and to neutralize the age difference between younger teachers and their elderly students. "In the past one year of teaching, I have focused on passing information to my students to help them understand hospice care and end-of-life care…My lecture is very professional so it

needs to be delivered or presented in a professional tone. I do not regard elderly students as elders but just adults …But I would add more lecture content regarding illness in relation to older age. There is no adaptation of communication style of teaching for class with elderly students…" (Teacher 3, Lu, female, aged 40). Another teacher also maintained the same point: "my communication with elderly students can be more like that between a teacher and students in a traditional sense, because you need to claim the authority when introducing serious topics, for instance, theories" (Teacher 1, Lee, female, aged 50). The above arguments clearly indicated that communication styles as adopted in the context of senior education rely on the communication topics rather than just the default and overt relationships associated with the teaching and learning activities. Teachers' positioning themselves as teachers is not a default choice but rather a compromise made after realizing that fulfilling students' learning goals prevails other purposes, such as socializing or slowing down ageing.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to explore in what ways various relational perceptions held by teachers in senior education influences their choices of communication strategies with their elderly students. A number of relational perceptions or interactional roles emerge in the course of interviews. It is found that teacher-student relationships have a number of facets which could add uncertainty in the course of negotiating which communication strategies could be regarded appropriative. Taiwanese teachers, given the cultural endorsement of Confucianism, can practice their power over their students by demonstrating demand without mitigation of the face-threatening effects. However, in the context of senior educational activities, elderly students' advanced ages, on the other hand, endow them with greater power and social hierarchy. This dilemma faced by younger teachers is particularly obvious and they seem to always have a certain extent of struggles with avoiding causing offense or disrespect in their delivery of teaching with their students via languages. They have to negotiate with their students as to who they are to each other, in addition to a traditional teacher role. They could be friends, peers and youngsters. The multiple identities taking place in one communication context enrich the diversity of communication strategies perceived appropriate. Some of them include avoid direct commands, talking as if older students' children or juniors, accommodating speaking styles to disassociate elderly students' chronological age identity and carefully negotiating ways of address each other. A certain connections between relational types (such as acting like an expert, a youngster, or a peer) and the choices of adopting communication accommodation (as diversion from traditional teacher-student communication styles normalized in Confucianism) in senior educational contexts are also identified.

To acknowledge some research limitations of this paper, the preliminary findings are only based on the data derived from interviews with 6 teachers with a special focus on perceived relations with elderly students and the choices of the corresponding communication styles. In the future, more interview data could be taken into account or a wider range of questionnaire survey could be conducted to understand whether teachers' perceptions about elderly students' linguistic production and reception competence (stereotypes about older people) could influence their ways of communicating with their students. Furthermore, a number of other kinds of sociolinguistic encodings could be examined further, such as whether teachers use code-switching to teach elderly students and if so, what could be the underlying rationale and purposes.

References

COUPLAND, N. et al. (1988). Accommodating the elderly: invoking and extending a theory. Language in Society. 17. p.1-41.

GAO, M. (1998). Influence of native culture and language on intercultural communication: The case of PRC student immigrants in Australia. Symposium of Intercultural Communication. The Department of Linguistics, *Gothenburg University with the support by KIM and the Immigrant Institute in Boras.* [online] Available from http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr4/gao.htm [Accessed: 1st April 2015]

GRAINGER, K. (1993) "That's a lovely bath dear" : reality construction in the discourse of elderly care. *Journal of Aging Studies.* 7. p.247-62.

HERMAN, R. E., & WILLIAMS, K. N. (2009). Elderspeak's Influence on Resistiveness to Care: Focus on Behavioral Events. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias*, *24*(5). p.417–423. doi:10.1177/1533317509341949

HARWOOD, J. (2000). Communicative predictors of solidarity in the grandparent-grandchild relationship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.* 17 (6). p. 743-766.

HSIAO, C.-B., Liao, S. C., and Tsen, C.-N. (2014) Welfare service of senior education: the post-analysis of performance appraisal of Taichung senior learning center. *Journal of Social Development Study.*15. p. 28-47.

HUI, L. (2005). Chinese cultural schema of education: Implications for communication between Chinese students and Australian educators. *Issues in educational Research. 15* (1). p. 17-36.

LU, L. and WONG, K. C. (2007) The influence of teachers and students' psychological tradition and modernity, relational compatibility on the quality of teacher-student interaction and student's social well-being. *Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies.*27. p. 81-118.

MOODY, H. R. (1976) Philosophical presuppositions of education for old age. *Educational Gerontology.* 1(1). p. 1-15.

RYAN, E. B., BOURHIS, R. Y., and KNOPS, U. (1991) Evaluative perceptions of patronizing speech addressed to elders. *Psychology and Aging. 6*(3). p. 442.

RYAN, E. B., GILES, H. and HENWOOD, K. (1986) Psycholinguistic and social psychological components of communication by and with the elderly. *Language & Communication.* 6. p.1-24.

RYAN, E. B., HUMMERT, M. L. and BOICH, L. H. (1995) Communication predicaments of aging: patronizing behavior toward older adults. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology.* 14 (1-2). p. 144-66.

TSAO, T. Y. (2009) The interpretation of teacher-student relationships from the perspective of new professional value. *Education of Taipei County.* 68. p. 34-38.